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ABSTRACT

During research on cultural differences in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogy, it became obvious that the lack of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural typology was impeding research progress. The author's cultural heritage group, the Malara People, a subgroup of the Bandjalang People of northern New South Wales, agreed that their oral history heritage could be documented and used for educational purposes. Data were collected from three reference subgroups through interviews, group discussions, and general conversation. Using phenomenological analysis, a cultural typology was constructed in accord with Malara People's knowledge transmission guidelines, in which knowledge is available to all or is limited to Aboriginal persons, Malara People, family members, or those who have the right to know sacred information. Material on the Malara People's world view was organized into five categories depicted as circles: clan law based on the Creator's laws, knowledge as beliefs, values, behavioral norms, and Malara People's teachings that underpin both spiritual and practical learning. Research problems arose because Western methodological frameworks are based on theoretical principles inconsistent with the spiritual and theoretical principles of the Malara People. The broad principles of reflexivity were less inappropriate than other commonly used frameworks. (SV)

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Research: Documenting an Urban/Rural Aboriginal Culture.

Margaret R. Weir.

Abstract: This paper offers an account of how one Australian Aboriginal postgraduate documented an Urban/Rural Aboriginal Culture as part of the data for an enquiry into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogy (Weir 1993). The documentation process is described under the headings Purpose; Methodology; Selection of Informants; Data Processing; Analysis; Model Construction Process; Research Problems; and Research Outcomes. Intercultural considerations including culturally relevant and appropriate research methods are also discussed. Note: the contents of this paper are extracted from the author's 1993 M.Curr.Stud.(Hons) thesis.

PURPOSE

When researching the topic, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Is lander Pedagogy and Lists of Cultural Differences,* it became obvious that the absence of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural typology was impeding serious research into the area. For this reason my cultural heritage group, the Malara People: Bawden-Gordon Family Line, a sub-group of the Bandjalang People of Northern New South Wales, agreed that our oral history heritage could be used for educational purposes, that is, our non-material cultural traditions. (It was also understood, by the Malara People, that our documented non-material cultural heritage would serve as a supplemental cultural reference for future generations of our Family Line. Importantly, oral history would continue to remain the primary source for transmitting our cultural heritage.)

METHODOLOGY

The term methodology is taken to mean the study of the logical basis of a discipline (Rose 1982, 307). In other words, a methodology is a prescriptive way to increase knowledge according to an established set of assumptions about how to increase knowledge.

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METHODOLOGY

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I chose a culturally appropriate qualitative approach, that of Action Research. (Action-oriented research is the preferred methodology recommended by the now defunct. since 1989, National Aboriginal Education Committee.) Action Research is a procedure used by persons "who have examined their own values carefully, have become committed to a particular point, and wish to attempt social change" (Sargent 1983, 40-41). Since the Malara People's social change has been a continuous process this methodological procedure was consistent with our prevailing sociocultural

procedures. The enquiry, however, facilitated a shift in my People's social change process from that of solely oral history, to that of both oral history, and supplemental recorded history. The documentation procedure was a theory building exercise.

There were two main reasons for this choice in methodologies. The Action Research methodology enabled the Case Study Group, selected reference groups of my People, the Bawden-Gordon Family Line of the Malara People, to co-operatively interact to explain and interpret our cultural beliefs and practices rather than be treated as objects of study. The negotiated cultural interpretation and subsequent description were underpinned by reflexive ethnographic principles. Reflexive ethnographic principles translate into the research practice wherein the actor is studied rather than the action (Waters & Crook 1990, 87).

Ethical Issues

The ethical issues of an enquiry such as this one fall into two main categories .the worth of the study; and the status of the researcher' s participation, that is, whether it is covert or overt. Two further ethical considerations pertain to the effects of the enquiry on the persons concerned, and whether or not to publish the study (Sargent 1983, *34-35).* In other words, confidentiality issues and the use to which the research is put.

The worth of the study rested in the fact that it would fill a current data gap by providing a first attempted documentation of an urban/rural Aboriginal culture from which education theory can be extrapolated.

Since the researcher' s position was clearly explained and carried out as an overt participant observer, the ethical criterion of the researcher' s role was fulfilled.

Given that the three reference sub-groups understood the importance of the description of our cultural heritage as an educational research instrument, as well as the use to which that description would be put, my People's informed consent was thus implicitly secured at the outset of the research procedure (Giddens 1989, 686). In this respect my People anticipated that our cultural heritage description, would probably be published or, at the very least, be open to public viewing.

SELECTION OF INFORMANTS

Three main reference sub-groups constituted the authoritative sample group. In this manner, the sample group spanned three generations and included a wide range of respondents. This method thus ensured greater reliability of our cultural heritage data.

The cohesive thread which unified all the sub-groups rested in the fact that my People still maintain our non-material cultural practices, especially those of child-rearing and hierarchical structure.

Three sets of differing informal and unstructured verbal interactions were used to collect the oral history data, namely, interviews, group discussions, and general conversations. Furthermore, the interactions enabled the direct and open validation of the collected data, as well as the identification of any gaps and omissions.

DATA PROCESSING

Procedurally, the customary five phases of Action Research were applied, that is, collaborative dialogue, planning, action, observation, and reflection, in a three phase spiralling process (Sands 1988, 38). Furthermore, self was positioned as both self as researcher, and self as subject, for this educational endeavour. The spiralling process parallelled the customary three phases of Western ethnographic data collection procedures, that is, the first; middle; and final phases of fieldwork, albeit within a modified Action Research framework (McNeill *1985,* 70-8 3).

Each of the three spiralling phases consisted of, collaborative dialogue with some members of the three sub-reference groups; planning the presentation of the data; action to write-up the presentation; observation of my Peoples' reactions to the draft presentation of the data; and reflection on how to amend the data presentation in the light of the critiques.

Data Collection

Two primary sources of data as well as three sets of secondary sources of data were used to facilitate the cultural documentation process. One set of primary data included oral history information collected by self during visits to selected members of my People, over a two-month period. A second set of primary data included information collected by my nephew and my mother during a 12 month intensive data collection exercise in 1986.

The secondary sources of data included relevant ethnohistorical literature, (thirty one texts), about my People. These additional sources of data served to substantiate both the internal and the external validity of the documentation process. Conflicting oral and written sources of data were recorded to elucidate the issue of cultural misinterpretation.

Two literature searches were used as the basis for collecting the relevant ethnohistorical literature. Further sources of literature included information from the Clarence River Historical Society; the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (henceforth AIATSIS); and the personal libraries of my sister Elva Dickfoss, nephew Rodney Williams (Elva' s son) as well as my personal library.

Data Collection Procedures

The interview procedure was informal and therefore unstructured except for the uniform use of an opening focus question, "How did you learn your culture?". The objective of the enquiry was facilitated by this method (Douglas *et al.* 1988, 30). From that starting point the interview became a joint product between self as reflexive researcher and the interviewee (Thompson 1988, 246). The shared discourse proceeded as a selective memory recall exercise, mainly controlled by the interviewee in terms of thematic recall. Moreover, by this method, a wide variety of individual views were obtained. The term, discourse, is taken to mean:

> "communication of thought by words" (Blair 1983, *153).* The definition assumes a "ready-made way of thinking . [that] can rule out alternative ways of thinking and hence preserve a particular distribution of power [through] . a unified and structures domain of language-use that constrains what can be said or thought" (Abercrombie *et al.* 1988, 71, 119).

As it happened, each of the individual interviewees spontaneously focused on a different aspect of our cultural heritage. This occurred even though self as researcher did not relay any information regarding the nature and scope of interviewee responses, for both confidentiality reasons and 'researcher influence' considerations. By way of example, some of the spontaneous topics were, spirituality; heritage stories; racism; education; spiritual power; roles of men and women; land rights; and a comparison between some of my People's cultural traditions with those of some traditional Northern Territory Aboriginal groups.

ANALYSIS

Analysis "is a process in which different aspects of the data can be related to one another" (Waters & Crook 1990, 24). Analytical procedures are basically concerned with two things which issues are to be examined, and the perspective from which those issues are to be interpreted. The aim of analysis is to produce "a set of findings, or new statements which can be made about the structure of social behaviour" (Waters & Crook 1990, 24).

The cultural data was interpreted by reflexive principles, that is, "seeing ourselves as we see ourselves (Steier 1991, *5).* As already stated. the construction of the cultural tvpology was guided by adherence to the broad perspective of reflexivity, as conceived by Hammersley and Atkinson in their 1983 study.

Within this theoretical framework the Case Study Groups' "life-world and its associated states of consciousness" were analyzed using phenomenological principles (Abercrombie *et al.* 1988, 184). Phenomenological principles are based on the conceptual notion that human beings are the active agents in the construction of their social worlds rather than being the passive reactors to external social forces (Abercrombie *et al.*1988, 184).

Since the Case Study Groups' conversations and talk were geared to explanations of cultural history and cultural features, these units of data were analyzed and interpreted according to that perspective. In other words, the Case Study Groups' conversations and talk were analyzed and interpreted in the light of the inter-relationship between my People's cultural practices and our 'law' as the causal foundation for those cultural practices.

The outcome of phenomenological analysis is usally the construction of either a typification or a typology and thus my Peoplel's cultural practices were diagrammatized as well as described (Abercrombie et al. 1988, 184). No claim is made regarding the representativeness of the Malara People in relation t other urban/rural Aboriginal cultural groups (McNeill 1985,88).

The cultural typology was constructed according to the main criterion for assessing a typology, that is, its usefulness in identifying a range of processes or issues (Waters & Crook 1990, 366). In precise terms, the typology corresponded with Waters' and Crook's (1990, 366) prescriptive formula for typology construction:

> the categories must be mutually exclusive;

the typology must be exhaustive;

the category boundaries must unambiguously discriminate; and

the basis on which categories are created must be a recognizable theoretical dimension and preferably a fundamental dimension which enables propositions to be stated about each type.

The practical application of this prescriptive formula resulted in a diagrammatized cultural typology together with a narrative description. Importantly, a culturally appropriate Aboriginal perspective was maintained through illustrating my People's belief in the interactiveness and interconnected of life, in both its physical and spiritual dimensions. The method of the cultural analysis was informed by Glaser and Strauss' (1967) "constant comparative method" (Rose 1982, 124). This method entails the constant refinement or revision of results until they are consistent with the data" (Rose 1982, 124).

MODEL CONSTRUCTION PROCESS

My membership within the Case Study Group, as well as personal lived-experience knowledge extended through spiritual higher learning, meant that I, together with some other sample group members, already had awareness of the theoretical basis of our People's cultural heritage.

It needs to be noted that only those Family Line members who are spiritually motivated by a belief in The Creator would attempt to totally conform to the guidelines illustrated in the typology. In this respect, members who choose not to believe in The Creator might well adhere to Malara People's law but, ascribe the source of the law to my People's socially constructed practices, rather than to The Creator. (Freewill choice is usually respected by members of the Malara People once the age of puberty has been reached.)

The typology was constructed in accord with my People's knowledge transmission guidelines (Weir 1993, 69-70):

MALARA PEOPLE, BAWDEN-GORDON FAMILY LINE KNOWLEDGE TRANS MISSION CATEGORIES

Information	available to all persons, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal
Confidential Aboriginal Information	Confidential Aboriginal information, not Available to non-Aboriginal persons
Confidential Malara People's Information	Only available to members
Private Family Information	Available to family members
Sacred/Secret Information	Available only to those who have "the Right to know.

Model Construction Phases

Using Waters' and Crook s prescriptive formula for typology construction (with modifications to ensure cultural appropriateness), the cultural model was constructed in five phases.

First, an overview of my People's world view was written. The narrative included our shared views about the meaning and purpose of life and how life should be lived. Topics included Geographic Location; Genealogy; Cultural Heritage and Law; Symbols; Sacred Tasks/Labours;

Values; Behavioural Norms; Relationship to Land and Nature; Teaching/Learning Methods; Teaching Stories; and Role Models.

Second, material from the overview was organised into five categories depicted as circles, that is, Clan law based on The Creator's Laws; Knowledge as beliefs; Values; Behavioural norms; and Malara People's Teachings.

The five circles were explained as follows. *Circle 1,* (from the centre), depicts the belief that The Creator, as both Father and Mother, is the Creative Energy of the universe. Simplistically, The Creator, in the celestial realms, is the Father, and The Creator, through His/Her children on earth is Mother, hence the saving, Mother Earth. *Circle 2,* depicts our beliefs, as knowledge of The Creator s Laws governing life as it is to be lived on earth. *Circle 3,* depicts ideal practices as values to be upheld in daily individual lived action. *Circle* 4, depicts ideal action as behavioural norms to be carried out/practised in daily life. *Circle 5,* illustrates my People's sayings/teachings that underpin both the spiritual learning and practical learning.

Third, the five categories were sub-divided into seven subsets correspondent with my People's interpretation of seven aspects of The Creator's Energy, that is, Power: Obedience; Knowledge; Self Direction; Self Rule; Nurture; and Order. These aspects of energy, also described as principles of behaviour, consist of formulas or, guidelines, for inbuilding soul lessons, that is, character traits. The segments could be termed as rainbow rays of energy, but this is not a term that has been used by the Malara People. Principles of behaviour can be abused, in which case they are considered as pervers ions of Clan law. Perverting Malara People's law is the same as stepping outside our law.

See, for example, *Segment 2 (obedience)* which contains the formula for respecting all life through obedience to the law, in the sense of a wisely reasoned, freewill compliance with the law, rather than a mindless following of the law. The obedience principle is located within the context of a group contribution to The Creator' s work on Mother Earth. Some perversions are, disobeying our law; arrogance; and disrespecting Clan elders.

Fourth, This information was diagrammatized as five sets of concentric circles divided into seven segments. The framework of the typology, as already stated, was structured on concentric circles to reflect my People's belief in the interactiveness and interconnectedness of life, in both its spiritual and physical dimensions.

Fifth, A comprehensive description of the Malara People's view was written to explain our cultural beliefs as cultural values to be upheld as ideal practices/norms, to be followed by each individual in daily life. To facilitate explanation, each component of each circle was divided into two parts, the law (theory) and, the enactment of the law (practice). See, for example, Circle 3'- Clan Sayings/Teachings (Weir 1993, 86-87):

> Circle 3. Teach ***in~ 4 theory, reality is conceived as being*** *part of The Creator's universal home, that is, one's place in the scheme of the universal natural order. Reality is concerned with attaining oneness/wholeness with this natural order, that is, consolidating one's place in this natural order. Solutions to life's problems are sought from within, and not from without since one's point of contact with The Creator resides in one's spiritual heart centre. Furthermore, problem solving involves 'looking at the whole in order to solve a part' (Borneman 1988, 35). Law br (1982, 16) explains this phenomenon from a Western perspective:*
>
> *Whether the product of an eastern or a western culture, the circular mandala or sacred diagram is a familiar and pervasive image throughout the history of art. India, Tibet, Is lam and medieval Europe have all produced them in abundance, and most tribal cultures employ them as well, either in the form of paintings or buildings or dances what is consistently striking about this form of diagram is that it expresses the notion of cosmos, that is of reality conceived as an organized, unified whole.*
>
> **Circle 3. Teaching 4 practice,** reality, for the Clan, is based our readiness principle, which in turn, is based on the Clan' s perception of 'time' in its relationship to the universal order the fundamental concept is 'the ever-present now'. Time is considered timeless, in the sense that 'the individual stands on their point in infinity, and can simultaneously look forward to the future, while looking backward to the past, in the fullness of their understanding of what is happening in the present'. The consciousness of this phenomenon comes as a Gift from The Creator and is related to the concept of expanded consciousness. The Clan understands that the gift of expanded consciousness is given by The Creator, to only those who are worthy. Thus, reasoning is not the way to an awareness of/knowing The Creator, but rather, The Creator reveals Himself/Herself to individual' s, when He/She decides they are ready.
>
> One aspect of viewing the world as a unified whole, is a tendency to think holistically. This tendency is grounded in the notion, as already stated, that "if you can't see a total picture you can't find a total solution" (Prophet 1983).

Significantly, my People's Teachings have been proven to be timeless and, they assist our members to maintain their cultural integrity, while coexisting within a rapidly changing external cultural environment, such as that of contemporary Australian society.

RESEARCH PROBLEMS

During the conduct of the enquiry two methodological difficulties arose which can mainly be ascribed to intercultural differences. First, finding an appropriate methodology was a major problem, given the secular base of western methodologies. The dilemma was embodied in the Malara People's (also the Case Study Group) perception that cultural practices which are interpreted from spiritually inconsistent and, therefore, theoretically inconsistent bases, will not only give a false picture of their cultural heritage but be tantamount to 'stepping outside' the law. The act of 'stepping outside' our law, furthermore, embodies the conceptual notions of a denial of The Creator's Laws, which is a denial of identity as a son or daughter of The Creator.

The divergent theoretical and, thereby, spiritual issue relates to the concepts from which social worlds can be constructed. My People's socially constructed knowledge has continuously been based on subjective interpretations of how to act out, in daily life, The Creator's Laws. In this respect, my People's progressive spiritual and socio-cultural evolvement has occurred as spiritual knowledge has increased and outmoded cultural practices were consequently discarded. The various theoretical frameworks focusing on "ideal types", such as those of Simmel; Weber; and Goodenough; were inconsistent with my People's continuous cultural change procedures or, the concepts underpinning our law.

Second, choice of Western methodologies by which to interpret the conversational cultural data posed spiritual and theoretical problems for this researcher. The fundamental reason related to the fact that none of the frameworks were based on theoretical principles which were consistent with the spiritual and theoretical principles of my People, which was also the Case Study Group.

The basis of the dilemma aro,se from Malara people's cultural imperative concerning personal accountability for one' s actions. This spiritual and theoretical dilemma was resolved by adhering to the broad principles of reflexivity, as conceived by Hammersley and Atkinson in their 1983 study. As a consequence, the methodological choice of reflexivity was less spiritually inappropriate than other commonly used theoretical frameworks, such as Symbolic Interactionism; and Ethogeny. Both methods are part of the sociology of interaction (Somerville 1988, 49). Symbolic Interactionism focuses on "the centrality of language and of symbols as a whole in human social life (Giddens 1989, *695).* Ethogeny focuses on the meaning-making of accounts "given by participants in the social episodes in which they have been involved" (Somerville 1988, 49). The respective fundamental ideological objections to these seemingly viable theoretical alternatives were: the adherence to solely naturalist principles which deny the validity of scientific knowledge

(Hammersley & Atkinson 1983, 234); and a non-recognition of the epistemological concept of Absolute Truth (Harre & Secord 1972, 228).

RESEARCH OUTCOMES

Constructing a typology of an urban/rural Aboriginal group's cultural heritage served three practical purposes. First, a supplemental cultural record for my People was documented. Second, a research instrument was produced for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education. Third, guidelines for constructing a cultural model were constructed which might be used by the wider Community.

This account of how an Aboriginal cultural typology was documented has been explained in terms of the purpose and usefulness of the exercise and, how I consequently planned, pursued, and reported my research enquiry (Lindvall 1969, 110).

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